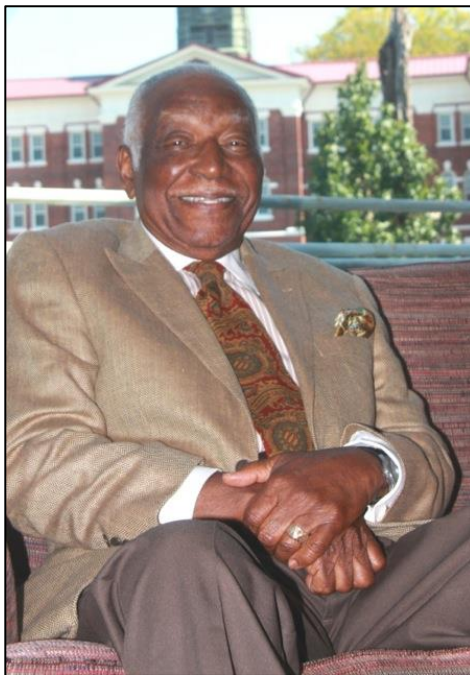


## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# The 1970s Integration of Veterinary Students at Tuskegee University

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble  
June 26, 2015

While interviewing 1971 Tuskegee graduate, Dr. Linda Jacobson, for a book Julie Kumble and I are writing about leadership in veterinary medicine, we were confronted with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and how it affected veterinary education.<sup>1</sup>



*Eugene Adams DVM, PhD, former Professor and Department Head of Vet Pathology and Microbiology  
Author of the history of Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine  
(Photo by the author, 2012)*

Far from the ivory tower isolated from society, campuses in the 1960s were permeable to peaceful and occasionally violent social change movements. At Cornell and The Ohio State University, and perhaps other places, veterinary education was not immune to the campus disruption. There was an armed takeover of Cornell's Willard Straight Hall in April 1969 and the 12-day closure of Ohio State University took place the following May. In both cases, most veterinary classes continued, but the scars on some students were not inconsequential.

In his book on the history of Tuskegee's School of Veterinary Medicine, Eugene Adams refers to the civil rights period as "tumultuous" and said that Tuskegee was involved in the "peaceful demonstrations by Afro-Americans seeking redress of long-standing civil rights injustices." In spring 1968, a substantial number of veterinary students joined in the larger university demonstrations and the campus was closed for eight and one-half days. The third Annual Veterinary Medical Symposium was cancelled.<sup>2</sup>

Linda Jacobson, a white Jewish woman from Brooklyn, was an aspiring veterinarian. Unable to gain acceptance to Cornell – it was a near impossibility for a woman from New York City to get into Cornell's DVM program at the time – and facing a stone wall from other colleges because she was not a resident of those respective states, Jacobson became the second white woman to enter Tuskegee's College of Veterinary Medicine.

The first white student (a male) to apply to Tuskegee for veterinary medicine was in 1948, and during the next 15 years, more and more applications were received. There was a sharp increase in the 1960s. However, the segregation laws of the State of Alabama, and the south in general, were unyielding. Moreover the university charter did not allow admission of white students (or faculty).<sup>3</sup> A number of factors (not discussed here) led to administrative changes allowing the break in the color barrier for students admitted in 1965, and Jacobson arrived two years later as a member of a class with 25 students including six whites. She was the only woman.<sup>4</sup>



*Dr. Linda Jacobson with a bovine patient during her student days at Tuskegee.*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Jacobson)

Dr. Jacobson's reception in the community was reflective of the turbulent era.

*Survival was not easy because the white towns people resented me for going to a black school and I was treated very dismissively in many of the stores. There were black students who were very angry that I was accepted and one black student one or two years ahead of me said, "I couldn't get into Auburn; how did you get into here?" I was being torn apart in many ways.*

She also had wonderful and supportive friends, mostly black, who advised her to "just ignore them; they're just trying to make you uncomfortable." She learned to "keep my mouth shut and emotions in check." She decided to "ride it out" because she had fought so hard to get into vet school, and wanted to be a veterinarian so badly.

The south at that time could be dangerous, and that was also Jacobson's perception. She remembers driving back home from the veterinary school one night shortly after Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, "I felt it much safer to detour through town rather than taking the shorter route through campus as students were organizing and carrying 2 x 4s." She understood the "rage that was present in the community," but didn't want to be a victim of it.

When she sits down now with Dr. Carolyn Self, her close friend, supporter and classmate,

*We remember us as a black and white women driving through Alabama going to Auburn and stopping at a truck stop and having a nice meal. We sit there reminiscing that we are lucky we are alive because we would have trucks following us with a gun rack in the back. Maybe that was just the "we are never going to die mentality of a 20-year-old," but felt we were lucky to be alive.*

When we asked Dr. Jacobson why so many Tuskegee veterinary students went on to major leadership positions, such as deans, leaders in public health and organized veterinary medicine, she cited the legacy of founder Booker T. Washington and his ability to bridge the color gap.

She also spoke of the building of the veterinary college by veterinary students in the 1940s, literally brick-by-brick, which she believes created a foundation of student involvement and sense of empowerment that persists today. She reminded us that the current AVMA president, Ted Cohn, is a Tuskegee graduate who graduated shortly after her.

As for Dr. Jacobson, she has been a remarkable leader, attaining numerous leadership positions including president of the New York City Veterinary Medical Association and of the New York State Veterinary Medical Society; and president of the North American Veterinary Conference.

When we asked her why she also agreed to be president— the first woman president – of the Tuskegee Veterinary Alumni Association, she just glowed, "Because Tuskegee has my heart and soul," she replied.



*Prominent Statue at Tuskegee University of Booker T. Washington and child,  
called "Lifting the Veil of Ignorance"*  
(Photo by DF Smith, 2012)



*Dr. Linda Jacobson DVM, Tuskegee '71*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Jacobson)

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Linda (DVM Tuskegee '71). Telephone interview with authors, June 10, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, Eugene W. *The Legacy: A History of The Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine* (Tuskegee, The Media Center Press, 1995), 79.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 79-81.

KEYWORDS:

Tuskegee University  
African-American veterinarians  
Civil rights era  
Linda Jacobson  
Eugene Adams  
Carolyn Self  
Women's leadership  
Ted Cohn

TOPIC:

Women's Leadership  
African American Veterinarians

LEADING QUESTION:

When did Tuskegee first admit White veterinary students?

META-SUMMARY:

An interview with Dr. Linda Jacobson, the second white veterinary graduate from Tuskegee University.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

**Dr. Donald F. Smith**, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

---

**Julie Kumble** is Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Easthampton, Massachusetts 01027. She can be reached at [juliek@womensfund.net](mailto:juliek@womensfund.net).